

Obama reiterates war threats as Iran, major powers agree to new talks

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Following a bellicose speech before the principal pro-Israel lobbying group on Sunday and a White House meeting with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on Monday, President Barack Obama reiterated the readiness of the United States to go to war against Iran at a press conference on Tuesday.

At the same time, Obama defended his policy of continued diplomatic and political pressure on the Iranian regime backed by crippling sanctions, holding in reserve for now a military attack should Tehran reject the dictates of Washington and its European allies.

The first presidential press conference of 2012 was dominated by questions on Iran and Syria and tactical differences between the US and Israel. In talks with Obama and a speech Monday night at the America Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) convention in Washington, Netanyahu made clear that Israel was prepared to carry out unilateral military strikes against Iranian nuclear facilities and was hostile to further talks between Tehran and the P5 +1 countries—the five permanent members of the UN Security Council (the US, Britain, France, Russia and China) plus Germany.

European Union foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton announced Tuesday that the P5+1 powers had accepted an offer from Iran to resume talks on Iran's nuclear program. The announcement coincided with two other moves by Iran aimed at easing tensions and facilitating talks.

The Iranian Supreme Court on Monday overturned a death sentence against former US Marine Amir Mirzaei Hekmati, who had been convicted of spying for the US.

On Tuesday, a semi-official Iranian news agency said the country would grant International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspectors access to parts of the Parchin military complex, located 18 miles southeast of Tehran.

At Washington's behest, the IAEA has demanded access to the site, which is a non-nuclear facility and not subject to the agency's oversight. It has responded to Tehran's previous denials by suggesting the site is being used to carry out secret nuclear weapons development.

At the press conference, Obama countered attacks by Republican presidential candidates, three of whom addressed the AIPAC conference on Tuesday and charged Obama with failing to sufficiently back Israel and procrastinating in attacking Iran. He did so first by reiterating the statement he had made to AIPAC and Netanyahu: "My policy is not containment, my policy is to prevent them [Iran] from getting a nuclear weapon."

He then accused his opponents of political grandstanding and taking a "casual" attitude toward war, noting some of the costs and dangers involved in an attack on Iran. He touted his own "success" in imposing brutal economic sanctions that are having a growing impact on the country, and isolating the Iranian regime diplomatically and politically.

In what the media has generally portrayed as an endorsement of diplomacy over war, Obama said, "At this stage, it is my belief that we have a window of opportunity where this can still be resolved diplomatically.... To resolve this issue will require Iran

to come to the table and discuss in a clear and forthright way how to prove to the international community that the intentions of their nuclear program are peaceful.”

In reality, this supposed defense of diplomacy reflects a further turn toward military action. The Obama administration has gone from speaking of the military option as a somewhat remote possibility to suggesting that there “still” remains a slight chance that it can be avoided.

Obama’s talk of a “window of opportunity” for Iran to carry out the impossible task of proving a negative—that its nuclear program is not for military purposes—as well as his profession of concern for the “costs of war” are eerily reminiscent of the statements of George W. Bush about Iraqi “weapons of mass destruction” in the run-up to the US attack on that country.

There are many indications that the Obama administration wants to delay a military attack on Iran until after the elections—in part to avoid the electoral fallout from an explosion in oil prices, in part to use negotiations to deliver Tehran ultimatums and then cite its “defiance” of the “international community” as justification for military aggression. The resulting war would aim to topple the current regime and install a puppet government, as in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya.

To this end, Obama was effusive in his speech to AIPAC on Sunday and remarks made prior to his talks with Netanyahu on Monday in declaring his unqualified support for Israel and citing his record of backing Israeli aggression against its Arab neighbors in Gaza and elsewhere. He made a point of explicitly rejecting a policy of containing a nuclear-armed Iran in favor of a policy of preventing Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons, and directly stating Washington’s commitment to using military means to do so if necessary. He also declared his support for Israel’s “sovereign right” to unilaterally attack Iran or any other country.

He told AIPAC that his administration was committed to “use all elements of American power to pressure Iran and prevent it from acquiring a nuclear

weapon.” This is an open-ended formulation that could include not only the current measures—economic warfare, terrorist attacks on Iranian nuclear scientists, and cyber-attacks on Iranian nuclear facilities—but also missiles, troops and even nuclear weapons. It should be recalled that the current secretary of state, Hillary Clinton, declared in 2009 that she would support the “annihilation” of Iran should it attack Israel.

This appears to be aimed at convincing Netanyahu to refrain from launching what Obama has referred to as a “premature” attack on Iran. Meanwhile, Washington is moving ahead with plans to attack the country. It has doubled the number of aircraft carrier battle groups stationed in the Persian Gulf area, deploying both the USS Abraham Lincoln and the USS Carl Vinson. In comments to the media last week, US Air Force Chief of Staff General Norton Schwartz confirmed that plans for attacking Iran have not only been prepared, but have been sent to the president and the defense secretary.

“What we can do, you wouldn’t want to be in the area,” Schwartz declared. Pentagon officials said the options included wide-ranging attacks on every aspect of Iran’s military, security and intelligence apparatus.

The *Wall Street Journal* reported last week that the Central Command, which oversees US military operations in the region, has requested the re-allocation of \$100 million in military spending to step up war preparations against Iran.



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